

Pioneers Prepare For Season Opener

Written by Mike Kelly

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The Watauga High football team kicks-off the 2011 season at home Friday night, August 19.

And for a team that finished the 2010 campaign on a sour note, the Pioneers, riding a three-game losing streak dating back to last fall, have quite a challenge on their hands---taking on a juggernaut in A.C. Reynolds.

The Rockets, led by Shane Laws, are 45-10 the last four years, including a state championship. And the Rockets, who own a commanding lead in their series with the Pioneers (ACR leads the all-time series, 9-2), have only beaten WHS by the mear total of 15 points in their last two meetings.

And despite a disappointing season in 2010 (the Pioneers were 3-8 and missed the playoffs for the first time since 2005), head coach Tim Pruitt, who begins his fourth season at the helm, likes what he's seen so far.

"We're young in spots," he said. "But we have a seasoned kid at quarterback in Ethan (Greene), and we have a quality running back in Kyle Chambers, who will carry a big load for us this season. Our attitude has been great, and the kids are anxious to learn. It's been a good experience, so far."

And the Pioneers return nine starters (five on offense and four on defense), including 20 lettermen. Another plus, linebacker Alex Fox, who suffered a detached lateral-collateral ligament in his right knee last fall in WHS's third game (against Avery) returns.

"Not to belittle the people we had in there, but I really felt losing Alex probably cost us a few wins last season," Pruitt said. "He's a solid football player. We really missed him out there. He's one of our biggest leaders."

And Fox, who suffered his first serious football injury, had a very strong off-season. A four-year varsity starter, Fox hopes to make up for lost time with a big senior year.

"My goal, like a lot of guys out here, is play college football next season," he said. "But I'm just glad to be playing again. I went through rehab, and I really had to hold myself back. It was tough getting hurt like I did last year. Things like that happen sometimes, but it's my senior year, and I just wanted to get healthy, so I could play this season."

Fox will be playing with a brace on his right knee, but according to him, it won't limit his abilities on the field.

"I feel great," he said. "I can't wait to get the season started. I've been playing at this level going into my fourth year, and I've learned a lot. And I really like this team. The attitude is great compared to last year."

Another guy hoping for better results is Greene, who split time at quarterback with Caleb Watson last fall. And despite his part-time status at the position, Greene put up some pretty good numbers. Greene completed 50% of his passes and threw for 753 yards with a 102.26 efficiency rating. But the Pioneers feature a young receiving corps this season. Mo Gore and Trey Kavanaugh (both preferred walk-ons at Appalachian State) are gone. Those two combined

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for 34 receptions for 637 yards and six touchdowns last fall.

"It's a new season, and we've got some young receivers," Greene said. "They just need to get some reps, and they'll be ok. I'm not concerned about it. We'll be all right. We've got some good young players on this team. It was good to see a different team the other night, instead of playing against ourselves. It was our first test, and I thought we did real well."

Greene had a big scrimmage Tuesday night against Johnson County (TN). He threw three touchdown passes, including a 70-yard strike to Ethan Poulos. He also had a 37-yard scoring toss to Kyle chambers, and he hooked up with Clint Trivette on a 21-yard touchdown pass.

"And Ethan can run, too," Pruitt said. "He did a good job for us last season. He picked up a lot of valuable experience, and he's going to be a real plus for us back there. Like I said before, I really like this group. They've really worked hard and they're willing to learn. As a coach, you can't ask for much more from your players."

WHS will host a four-team jamboree Friday night at Jack Groce Stadium. Mount Airy, Elkin and Salisbury round out the four-team field.

"All those teams have championship-game experience," Pruitt said. "These are well-coached teams. It'll be good competition for our kids, especially with A.C. Reynolds coming up next Friday in our season opener."

The JV games begin at 5 p.m.; the varsity begins at 6:30 p.m.

□ **NOTES:** Taylor Shuford and Cody McKinney will not play in Friday night's jamboree. Shuford is out with a knee injury; McKinney is out with a broke hand. Pruiitt hopes to have both players back by August 26 when the Pioneers begin a three-game road trip in West Jefferson against Ashe County.